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SUBJ: INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN SAADA: A QUESTION OF DEFINITION AND STRATEGY

11. (SBU/NF) SUMMARY: According to a recent estimate, the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Saada Governorate who require food aid has grown to 77,000. This number, however, does not accurately reflect the complex reality of population movements in Saada as a result of the conflict there, and true IDPs may represent only a third of this number. For its part, the ROYG has decided that active cooperation with international agencies may serve its interests in Saada. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) At a January 6 donor community meeting chaired by the World Food Program (WFP) in Sanaa, WFP's Country Director for Yemen Mohamed El-Kouhene and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative in Yemen Claire Bourgeois discussed their assistance to IDPs in Saada. WFP began limited nutritional assistance to approximately 36,000 IDPs in June 2007, and El-Kouhene encouraged further donor country support for a joint WFP/UNHCR plan developed in December to provide food aid to 77,000 IDPs in two IDP camps in Saada city through March 2008. UNHCR also provides non-food assistance such as tents and blankets to IDPs.

14. (SBU/NF) El-Kouhene admitted that the 77,000 figure for IDPs in Saada was an approximation, developed in cooperation with UNHCR by adding 10% to an earlier International Committee of the Red Cross/Red Crescent (ICRC) estimate. El-Kouhene said perhaps only one-third of the 77,000 were actually unable to return to their homes due to the conflict, and that much of the remainder had returned to their villages but remained reliant on outside assistance because the conflict had destroyed their assets. He said WFP and UNHCR had agreed to classify all people receiving food aid as IDPs both to facilitate planning and to avoid adding controversy to an already volatile situation.

15. (SBU/NF) In a separate meeting on January 27 in Sanaa, Samer Haddadin, UNHCR Protection Officer responsible for Saada, lauded ROYG support for his agency's operations there. While acknowledging that it had taken almost a year to get initial ROYG approval for a UNHCR office in Saada, Haddadin said cooperation was now good. The ROYG currently provides security for UN operations, and has also expressed interest in UNHCR training on IDP registration. Additionally, it has encouraged UNHCR to expand its aid, and has asked the ICRC to construct on its behalf a third camp for IDPs in Saada city.

16. (SBU/NF) According to Haddadin, Saada Deputy Governor Salem Al-Wahishi is the key figure in ensuring cooperation. Haddadin said the contrast between the ROYG's cooperation with UNHCR on the IDP issue and its general lack of assistance on other issues, such as East African refugees, derives from the ROYG's desire that international aid serve its interests. He elaborated that allowing the UN and NGOs to distribute assistance in Saada is designed to reduce local opposition to the government. Haddadin added that he was happy that, instead of constraining UN operations in Saada,

local government has been "complaining that we don't do enough."

17. (SBU/NF) COMMENT: Current figures on IDPs are largely a UN construct to facilitate aid planning for those affected by the conflict in Saada. More accurate data is unlikely unless the UNHCR and ROYG begin a registration process. However, continual flare-ups of fighting in Saada mean that population movements are likely to continue, as will the need for outside assistance. Haddadin's interpretation of the positive role of the ROYG makes sense in the larger context of ongoing government attempts to negotiate and co-opt support in Saada. By supporting UNHCR and WFP aid to IDPs in Saada, the ROYG probably hopes to be associated with these services and, as a result, bring about a reduction in anti-government opposition. While the potential for success of this strategy is unclear, for the time being, the ROYG's unusual level of cooperation with UN agencies in Saada is helping them provide assistance to IDPs. END COMMENT.

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